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# News Release

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*Washington, D.C.* -- "I have used and will continue to use every appropriate forum at my disposal, including the Congress, to send the message to VA employees that sexual harassment and discrimination will not be tolerated or condoned at any level, in any circumstance, under this Administration. I expect all managers in the chain of command and all employees to do likewise," Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs (VA) Hershel Gober said at a House Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing today.

Gober unveiled substantive changes in VA's Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) process, as well as general directives that encourage a positive workplace environment, one in which each employee is respected individually and for the value he or she brings to the organization. In addition, he restated his commitment to a core strength of the department -- the diversity represented in VA's culturally rich workforce.

Gober announced that:

- A separate office of complaint resolution, reporting to the Secretary through the Assistant Secretary for Human Resources and Administration, would be established and given responsibility for complaint processing;
- EEO counselors primarily would be full-time employees appointed and supervised by the office of complaint resolution; and,
- EEO investigators would, to the extent feasible, be full-time employees appointed and supervised by the office of complaint resolution.

These changes were recommended by a task force established by Gober on May 15 to examine VA's current EEO complaint system. This diverse group included representatives from VA Central Office, field facilities, staff offices, unions and major department components.

The task force conducted a thorough review of the current VA EEO complaint process, benchmarked VA against other federal agencies, developed models of a new complaint resolution process, and designed a new process with an implementation timetable.

Gober pointed out that the task force recommendations addressed the criticisms of Congress and others regarding the role of line management in the complaint process. "These changes will eliminate management from any complaint processing function," he stated.

Another task force, the Secretary's ad hoc Working Group on Sexual Harassment, coordinated an employee survey regarding unwanted sexual attention in the workplace. VA asked employees to recall work-related incidents and provide their perceptions of VA's sexual harassment policy, training, and general work environment, in order to deal with this societal issue in a constructive manner.

After reviewing results of the survey, the task force identified a need to: provide feedback to individuals who have been sexually harassed; emphasize departmental goals promoting a positive workplace environment; clearly state the values of the organization; evaluate the screening and selection process for executives; and re-evaluate how VA is holding line officials accountable at each level of the organization.

The survey was conducted by Klemm Analysis Group, Inc., who selected a random sample of 30,000 employees from the 232,308 men and women employed by VA during December 1995. Usable responses were received from 20,782 employees, a 70.5 percent response rate.

The survey found that:

- More than 80 percent of the respondents say they have seen and understand VA's sexual harassment policy, know how to file a complaint, and participated in VA's prevention of sexual harassment training;
- Most respondents believe that VA top management and their own supervisors discourage sexual harassment;
- Most respondents, 81 percent of the men and 63 percent of the women, did not perceive they were the target of unwanted sexual attention during the prior 12 months;
- Respondents under 35 years of age, women, and those with less education were much more likely to perceive they were the target of unwanted sexual attention during the prior 12 months;
- Co-workers were identified by the respondents as the source of 50 percent of the "most serious" incidents, including unwanted sexual remarks or noises and putting an arm around an individual without consent. Supervisors or superiors were reported as the source of 15 percent of the incidents considered "most serious" by the respondents.
- Thirty percent of the incidents involved "others" who were not VA employees or officials; Thirteen percent of the incidents identified as "most serious" by men and 12 percent of those identified by women respondents were reported to supervisors, attorneys, EEO counselors or union representatives at the time of the occurrence.

"The survey clearly demonstrates that VA's actions over the last five years have made a positive impact in dealing with the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace. VA will meet the challenge of this issue head on," said Gober.

"Make no mistake," he added. "VA is firmly committed to making the agency an employer of first choice and ensuring that a fair and neutral process is available to those employees who believe they have been victims of discrimination."